

THE GREAT PRAYER :

SHORT CHAPTERS ON JOHN XVII.

BY THE BISHOP OF DURHAM.

II.

WE have given some thought to the Great Prayer in itself. It has been thought exercised in the simplest possible direction, following up the question of the mind, what are these words and sentences to us? Are they the creation, with or without elements of fact behind it, of the soul of the writer, or are they indeed authentic, a true report of the utterance of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, "in the night in which He was betrayed"? If they are of the former sort, they are beautiful, they are interesting, but they are after all only a man's best thought. They are no more a revelation of the eternal than the words, for example, of Augustine or of Dante. And indeed they have this actual drawback, that they are given us by the writer, deliberately, as the words of the Lord. If they are not such, was not the writer's own moral sense short of an absolute rightness? But if they are of the latter sort, they are words of heaven, they are the voice of eternal truth, they correspond at least as surely to ultimate reality as if they were, in the Hebrew phrase, a *Bath Kôl*, "a daughter of the Voice," an utterance articulated from the sky. We can live by them, we can die upon them, if they are this.

And we saw, I think rightly, that a majestic moral probability (I use that word with a sense of all the greatness which Bishop Butler has taught us to attach to its highest grades) is wholly for this second alternative. Quite apart from the Great Prayer, we may truly know, with a complete moral conviction, that He who is said to have spoken thus was none other than God made Man. That immovable belief is a lawful guarantee for the veracity of the only records of His incarnate work and word which can claim to have authenticity at all.

More than eighteen centuries of human experience have found these records to be things living and life-giving in human hearts, hallowed and lifted by them into character and action at once humble and victorious over evil. We approach them then with

reasons for an untroubled trust given us alike from their origin and from their historical working in the world.

So in this short chapter, and the few to follow it, let us, when we have stood awhile in reverent imagination, with John, beside the Intercessor, and gathered up His words to the Father, go apart with these words, and kneel to ponder them, and ask them what, being His indeed, they tell us of the eternal things.

Our first interrogation shall be about the THEISM of the Great Prayer. It was spoken as definitely as possible to a Hearer. Do its words to Him, many of them being words concerning Him, tell us anything of Him? This Supreme, to whom the Incarnate speaks, what do we gather about His being, His glory? If we can drink in with deliberate thought the view of GOD taken by this unique Intercessor, God and Man, one Christ, it will assuredly satisfy our deepest and our highest thought to take the same view ourselves, and to be at rest, seeing so "the vision of the Almighty."

It will be a solace and a strength untold to both the reason and the heart to do so. What thoughtful soul has never felt the shock and strain of the question, Is God fact indeed? It is a question around which mysteries innumerable gather, mental, moral. They are such that we may fairly say, in passing, that one deep witness to the supreme fact, to the fact of God, is borne in actual connexion with them. Such is the host of problems, some purely of theory, some formidably embodied in fact and act, which the quest after God can and does awaken, that the vast prevalence in humanity, in the universal human heart, of a belief in some sort theistic, however dim, however spoiled, powerfully suggests that that belief would not be what it is without a corresponding reality to generate it and to sustain it against such stress.

Is there an ultimate Existence, transcendent, supreme? Is that Existence at once infinite, "the Power that alone is great," and also personal—knowing, willing, loving? Is that Existence good, and is it love, when observable existence within us and around us is so vastly troubled with evil? We cannot wonder, looking at the mysteries involved, that not only open moral rebels but many a spirit which, on our human standards, is fine and true should think itself away from theism, and dream of an ultimate Somewhat preferable to it as a thing of faith.

"I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a

puny thing to it, and the word is a rude sign to the feeling ; but I know no other. . . . Holding out my hand for the sunbeams to touch it, prone on the sward in token of deep reverence, thus I prayed, that I might touch . . . the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity."

The words are those of Richard Jefferies, in a passage powerfully descriptive of an intense and subtly possessing sense, felt in solitude on a south-country down, of the glory of nature. I think I can guess something of the attitude behind the words ; a feeling of the soul as if personality were limit, were imperfection, were almost the fount and origin of ill. Let me pass no harsh comment on the man who felt what those words try to express. But none the less, the words, if they correspond to reality, are infinitely sad. They mean that there exists no ultimate Friend for the groaning conscience, nor for the broken heart. They mean, what W. K. Clifford (my friend in our young Cambridge days) sadly said, when he turned away from Theism, and fought it with a lamentable hostility, that "we must do now without the great Companion."

From thoughts like these I for one find it a deep and unspeakable relief and solace to turn to the Great Prayer. Here is the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing His Theism. I know enough of Him, even historically, but spiritually also, with a knowledge which came to my spirit not of itself, to hold with humblest but most entire certainty that He is at once historical and eternal, human and divine. What He thought of God is for me final truth. I am sure that it is so, with the assurance to which that wise maxim eminently applies, "Let not what you know be ever disturbed in your mind by what you do not know." What He lets me know as His mind, that I reverently claim to know ; it is, as such, unshakable by the unknown.

Quite briefly then, what does He let us know here that He knows, about the supreme and sovereign Existence ? He knows that that Existence is not it, but He. The mortal man upon the green south down may think that he can deal with "an existence which is infinitely higher than deity." The Son of Man, in the night in which He was betrayed, looks up to the eternal height, and says, "FATHER." "Father, glorify Thy Son ; glorify Thou Him beside Thine own self," in Thy fellowship, on Thy seat ; "Now I come to Thee" ; "Holy Father, keep these men in Thy name" ; "Thou didst send Me into

the world ” ; “ Thou art in Me and I in Thee ” ; “ Father, I will that they be with Me where I am ” ; “ Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world ” ; “ O righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee ” ; “ I have made known to them Thy name and will make it known ” ; “ This is the life eternal, to know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.”

These quotations, I need not say, do not cover all that the Great Prayer says about the Theism of the Intercessor. In fact, the entire sacred utterance in its every phrase, in its whole essence and idea, is a disclosure of the thought about God of this Friend and Lord of man. To Him, as much as to His mortal followers, that night as much as to us now, the “ heaven ” to which He “ lifted up His eyes ” was physically invisible. He, in this respect, as truly as ourselves today, “ walked by faith, not by sight,” yes, as “ leader and accomplisher of faith ” (Heb. xii. 2), that is, as the supreme *Believer*. But then, for Him, and in Him for us, that faith was verified in ways many and wonderful, above all by the victory over death which followed the Great Prayer by not more than some fifty or sixty hours. Through Him, in Him, as those whom He that night prayed for, (for we “ believe on Him through the word ” of His first messengers, and now especially through this record of His supplication,) we can, will, and do look up, as with His eyes. So looking, we behold this wonderful Supreme, who is invisible but real. Because of the Theism of His own Son, we look up to the uncreated glory, and know that within it abides and reigns not “ an existence infinitely higher than deity,” but Abba, Father. We know “ Him,” knowing “ Jesus Christ whom He hath sent.” He is no unknowable and unnamable First Cause, but “ the God and Father of ” that blessed Lord and Brother of our being. Across all mysteries, unshaken by the countless things unknown, we know Him, through the Christ’s knowledge, as Holy, Righteous. And we are sure, through the same knowledge, that this Infinite and Eternal, this Father who infinitely and eternally loves the Son, who is absolutely like Him, also “ loveth us, because we love the Son, and believe that He came forth from God.”

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(To be continued.)